

A visit with Betsy Sullivan

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Betsy Humphreys came to Duxbury for the first time with her friend Sally Clark when she was 14. She was growing up in Hingham, but as can happen to the nicest people, seeing Duxbury for the first time led her to say to herself, "This is where I'm going to live!"

In a fairly long interim the girl we now know as Betsy Sullivan attended Catholic schools, culminating in a degree from Boston College. She has a career that began as a management trainee at a McDonald's in Watertown and wended upwards to her present job at First Republic Bank in Boston, where it can fairly be said: "the man you talk to [Betsy Sullivan] is the bank."

That has to be explained! Fifty years ago the late Ed Hickey was the pitchman for New England Merchants National Bank. "Where the man you talk to is the bank," he would say, without prejudice, but in his choice of words showing that the world needed to be improved. Betsy Sullivan's job today is to help clients get past bureaucratic obstacles to find solutions to their banking needs. "It's about relationships," she says. In other words she is the bank. She has thus benefited from a world that has changed for the better and has also contributed to making it better. In Duxbury, her contributions have been immeasurable.

Betsy met her husband Steven (Skip) Sullivan when they both were working for Honeywell Corporation. The young Sullivans settled in Sudbury, a lovely town. But for Betsy, a town without the sea was like a house without windows. By and by, (the year was 1985), she prevailed on Skip to look at houses in Duxbury. She says she knew she only had one shot at it.

Betsy wanted an antique house. Her significant other took the position that she could have an antique house in Duxbury – or she could have a new house in Duxbury, and a husband. They bought a new house on Alexander Way, with lots of children the same age as theirs, and where they spent many of the happiest years of their lives. By and by the Alden/Chandler consolidation controversy arose. The school department didn't believe it could go on supporting two elementary schools. Alden's parents pushed to keep Alden open, Chandler's Chandler. It was bitter, and Betsy Sullivan jumped in. When it was over, she says, "I had five new friends and the bug to do more."

Betsy's service in Duxbury was encouraged by the late Jack Canty, one of Duxbury's greatest citizens. Jack had served on the school committee and urged her to run. When another candidate dropped out she had a jolt (she says today) – she was going to be elected.

From 1992 to 2001 she served three terms on the Duxbury School Committee. Despite the frustration that came with the annual variables of state aid and fall enrollment that doesn't allow the school department to project a budget, Betsy enjoyed it and made more friends. She stood down after three terms because, she says, she believes offices should have an expiration date.

But the bug had a sweet bite. The following year Betsy was prevailed upon to run for selectman, leading to another jolt. With the retirement of Selectman Margaret Kearney, Betsy again found she was going to win. As a selectman, she saw the schools' budget from the town's



perspective, and she faced memorable controversies. A notable one was the just but controversial termination of the chief of police.

Based (in this writer's opinion) on her intelligence, practical smarts, an ability to get along with people and an unfailing sense of humor, Betsy Sullivan is good at what she does. When, after three terms as selectman she hit another self-inflicted expiration date, it wasn't long before Town Meeting Moderator Friend Weiler prevailed on her to serve on (and now chair) the finance committee.

Perhaps even more than the school committee and the board of selectmen, the finance committee justifies the tradition of home rule. This committee essentially runs a \$77-million corporation, half of which (the school department) is in a blind trust. Its year begins in the fall with twice-a-week meetings with town department heads. After New Year's, it meets twice a week until Town Meeting, which Betsy calls her favorite day of the year "except circus day." Over the summer it may meet a couple of times. After Labor Day, the cycle begins again. "I don't play paddle," Betsy says. This is her fun. At finance committee meetings one gets used to her one-liners. I tell her she could have performed on the Borscht Belt. But she has only nice things to say about the people she has served with. Her one-liners are never personal. Rather, they are her succinct way of telling the truth as she sees it.

As the Sullivans' children grew up and graduated to their own lives, younger families moved onto Alexander Way. "It got lonely," Betsy says. It was thus that after almost 28 years in that new house Betsy's chance came to have a Duxbury antique, and a husband. The Sullivans bought the 1800 Hunt/Pryor house on Washington Street – which they have lovingly renovated and restored.

Many parents are jolted by the truth that they raise their children up in order to let them go – and how quickly it happens. For the Sullivans, the jolt has been assuaged the fact that their children have settled in Duxbury, or promise soon to do:

- Molly and Jon Mazanec, and Fin, Ned, Bay and Ellie.
- Caitlin and Justin Galvin, and Grayson and Violet.
- Ted Sullivan. Camping out in Denver, summering in Duxbury (mother hopes).
- Casey Sullivan, to be married at St. John's on July 3.

Keeping an eye on everyone from the Village at Duxbury at age 98 is Betsy's mother, Betty Humphreys.

"I'm a lucky girl," Betsy says; and oh, how she has contributed to Duxbury's good luck.